

## A PUBLIC SQUARE FOR MIAMI'S DOWNTOWN



*Artistic rendering of proposed Millennium Park*

Miami's downtown has many wonderful features, including those with which nature regaled us. The most notable of those is a spectacular bay that can be observed from parks that have been long dormant and in some cases, nearly abandoned.

In many ways, Miami mirrors Chicago, in the sense that its Eastern flank is a body of water that borders the city all the way down from its Northern edge to its southernmost point. Yet the visual and practical effect of that waterfront is starkly different in the two cases.

Chicago's waterfront is both visible and highly usable; Miami's is hard to see and even harder to use. Unlike Chicago's main waterfront artery (Lakeside Drive), Biscayne Boulevard is not sufficiently raised to allow much view of the bay. And its eight lanes of traffic are an effective impediment to anyone living or working west of the boulevard to cut across eight lanes on foot and use the public spaces on the waterfront.

By contrast, Chicago has pedestrian tunnels that connect the western section of the downtown to the waterfront, creating at least a viable crossing for those wishing to take advantage of its lakefront parks.

I have been pondering this matter for more than a decade. Now, I find that there is a confluence of factors that beg for a solution along the lines depicted in the accompanying sketch. (The rendering is by an in-house architect, J.C. Garrido, who works for me as a county commission aide.)

The key parameters in the concept are as follows:

1. It buries Biscayne Boulevard for approximately half a mile, from the Southern tip of Bicentennial Park to the Northern tip of the Adrienne Arsht Performing Arts Center (PAC).
2. The proposed configuration connects three cultural facilities: the PAC, the Museum of Science and the Miami Arts Museum. These three facilities have cost a total of over a billion dollars in public and private funds.
3. The proposed configuration reclaims for public use, at surface level, an additional six acres of land. To that land reclamation are added the two D.O.T. parcels under the I-395 connector, plus the unoccupied expanse of Bicentennial Park, creating an aggregate public space of well over 40 acres. This downtown public space mirrors, but greatly exceeds, Chicago's Millennium Park, in terms of open space.
4. The proposal is timely because it dovetails into one private-sector development and one public sector roadway improvement. The private sector project is the one proposed by the Genting Group for the property now occupied by the *Miami Herald*, as well as contiguous lots that connect the bay to Biscayne Boulevard. It would be logical for that investor, with current plans to do a \$3 billion mixed-use development, to contribute to make the proposal economically feasible. It also dovetails with a Florida DOT project to raise the I-395 connector, as it traverses above Biscayne Boulevard.

As illustrated in the accompanying rendering, the opportunity of connecting the three cultural facilities and raising the highway offers an aesthetically pleasing solution to what is now an ugly reminder of our dependence on the automobile. The rendering envisions the raised highway as a "signature bridge" akin to the one that connects Bradenton to St. Petersburg. That motif is carried over to other architectural features that include observation towers at the FEC inlet on the Southern tip of Bicentennial and similar suspension terraces on what could be the bay-front hotel to be built by Genting on a lot which *The Herald* now occupies.

For those who think this concept is too costly and visionary, the idea of sinking the 100-foot boulevard for 750 meters is roughly equivalent to digging and building 15 Olympic-size pools in a row, three times deeper than the usual, then adding a roadway on top. In terms of dirt excavated, it is about 14% of the amount being excavated to build the unneeded Port tunnel.

Let's think big, Miamians.